

CHAPTER 1. SUMMARY

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, Section 15121 (a), state that an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) is an informational document which will inform public agency decision-makers and the public generally of the significant environmental effect of a project, identify possible ways to minimize the significant effects, and describe reasonable alternatives to the project. The public agency will consider the information in the EIR along with other information which may be presented to the agency.

This Draft EIR (DEIR), written by the Department of Fish and Game (Department), is intended to inform the public of the proposed project and disclose all information known to the Department regarding its potential impacts to the environment, and outline possible alternatives. Pursuant to Section 15087 of the CEQA Guidelines, this DEIR is available for public review for 45 days. During this review period, the public is encouraged to provide written comments regarding the DEIR directly to the Department of Fish and Game, Wildlife Programs Branch, 1812 9th St., Sacramento, CA 95814.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTIONS

The wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is classified as a resident game bird of California in Fish and Game Code Section 3500. Turkey hunting has become increasingly popular in recent years. Wild turkey populations are currently well established in the lower elevation oak woodlands of the state, most of which is private land offering limited hunting opportunities for the general public. Additional habitat is available on higher elevation public lands throughout the state that may support turkey populations and provide expanded hunting opportunities.

The proposed project contains six potential release sites for turkeys, primarily intended to populate lands administered by the United States Forest Service (USFS) where hunting recreation for the public is a management goal. These sites were selected to cover a range of conditions that would allow the Department to evaluate the feasibility of range expansion to increase hunting opportunities in other similar habitats statewide. Turkeys may exist at each of these sites already as the result of recent releases by the Department, but they are not considered well established.

The proposed project was selected to conservatively balance the need to expand wild turkey hunting opportunities by establishing new populations on public lands open to hunting, while proceeding cautiously with such projects to avoid potential impacts to the environment. The Department will continue to gather additional information in the project areas to better understand their ecological relationships in California, by attaching radio-transmitters to a sample of the released population at each site to enable monitoring of the released population. Information gathered from these studies will be used to help the Department develop future management actions regarding wild turkey releases in similar habitats.

PUBLIC INPUT AND AGENCY CONSULTATION

Prior to preparing this DEIR, a Notice of Preparation (NOP; Appendix A) was prepared by the Department and filed with the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) on June 16, 2000. The NOP was distributed by OPR to all state agencies for comment. Additionally, copies of the NOP were forwarded by the Department directly to federal regulatory and management agencies and interested non-government organizations and individuals. Appendix B contains a mailing list of those parties that received the NOP. The NOP requested that written comments be sent directly to the Department within 30 days following receipt, although late comments were also accepted. The Department also held a public scoping meeting on June 30,

2000, at the Resources Building in Sacramento, and encouraged any interested parties to attend the meeting for clarification of any aspects of the project and to receive oral comments. All comments received during the scoping period were considered for inclusion in this DEIR.

Additional meetings during this time were requested by the Department with the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), the USFS, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) regarding particular aspects of the proposed project. Because the focus of much of this project is on public lands administered by the USFS, the Department has been in close consultation with the USFS regarding wild turkey releases prior to and during the preparation of this document. Each of the release sites in the proposed project and alternatives in this document was mutually agreed upon between both agencies. Because of critical habitat designations within two of the six range expansion sites, the Department sought additional consultation regarding the potential take of California red-legged frogs, which are listed as an endangered species.

AREAS OF CONTROVERSY

The following section describes areas of controversy regarding the proposed project that were raised by agencies and the public during the scoping phase of this DEIR, pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines, Section 15123(c).

Potential Impacts to Sensitive Species

Concerns about the potential impacts of wild turkeys to sensitive native plants and animals have been raised by both government agencies and the public. Because wild turkeys are opportunistic omnivores, there is concern they may utilize sensitive resources to the point of decline. To date, there have not been any demonstrated

negative effects of wild turkeys on any sensitive organisms in or outside their native range, including California.

Conflicts with Land Management Policies

Opposition to turkey releases has been expressed by some state and national parks because turkeys are not indigenous animals to those parks and they are therefore inconsistent with land management policies in these areas. Wild turkeys have not been released in any parks, although they have moved into some parks as the result of stocking programs. When requested, the Department has agreed with some state and national parks to cooperate in the reduction of turkeys inhabiting these areas.

Compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

The release of wild turkeys into areas where they are not currently established is a project that may affect the environment and is therefore subject to compliance with CEQA. Historically, the Department filed Categorical Exemptions for all wild turkey releases statewide, citing Section 15307, which includes, in part wildlife preservation and enhancement activities by the Department. Because wild turkeys are a resident game bird, these projects were considered exempt under CEQA.

In 1996, the Department prepared a Mitigated Negative Declaration for a project involving a proposed turkey release site in San Diego County. The public raised concerns that wild turkey releases may have harmful effects to sensitive plants and animals under public trust by the Department. The Mitigated Negative Declaration was challenged in the San Diego County Superior Court by the California Native Plant

Society (CNPS) and Save Our Ranchlands and Forests.¹ The Superior Court determined that an environmental impact report was required for that project, as the evidence in the administrative record supported a fair argument that releasing wild turkeys in the Cleveland National Forest could result in significant adverse impacts to the environment. As such, the court ordered that the Department set aside the decision to release wild turkeys in the Cleveland National Forests pursuant to the negative declaration, and prepare an environmental impact report for the project. The Department abandoned that project, and did not pursue releasing turkeys in San Diego County any further.²

In late 1999, CNPS and other non-government organizations expressed concerns about the Department's use of Categorical Exemptions for proposed turkey releases in other areas of the state. The Department decided that, in order to fully disclose and analyze any potential substantial impacts to the environment from the release of wild turkeys, an EIR would be prepared for future wild turkey release projects. That decision resulted in the preparation of this DEIR.

SCOPE OF DEIR

The DEIR addresses the project of introducing turkeys to establish new populations and their potential impacts in previously unoccupied areas of the state.

¹*California Native Plant Society and Save our Forests and Ranchlands vs. California Department of Fish and Game* (Super. Ct. San Diego County, 1996, No. 694053).

²As the Cleveland National Forest project was abandoned, the Department was not required to prepare any further environmental documents to determine the significance of environmental impacts that project may have caused. The court's ruling in the San Diego case applied only to the Cleveland National Forest project at issue there, and any ruling in that case is not binding upon the Department's subsequent projects or decisions. The Department has nevertheless used the Superior Court's ruling as guidance in determining to prepare the instant EIR.

Although the goal of this project is intended to expand wild turkey hunting opportunities, any impacts associated with hunting of wild turkeys are addressed in the Department's Environmental Document for Resident Game Bird Hunting, which is available upon request from the Department.

Six release sites were selected for range expansion based on criteria mentioned earlier and discussed in more detail throughout this document. The project area considered in this document is a 25-mile radius surrounding each release site. This DEIR describes the existing environmental resources within those project areas and provides an analysis of potential impacts to those resources due to the proposed project.

All the environmental factors contained in the Environmental Checklist were considered as possible effects to the environment in the initial study (Appendix A, Notice of Preparation), and potentially significant impacts were identified to Biological Resources and Land Use/Planning. No agency or public comments were received regarding the NOP that identified potential impacts to any other environmental factors. Analysis of effects to Biological Resources and Land Use/Planning are presented in Chapter 4, Environmental Effects of the Proposed Project.

Three alternatives to the proposed project are presented in Chapter 5 of this document, including: 1) a no-project alternative that analyzes the impacts of approving versus not approving the project, 2) a more conservative alternative in which the proposed project is reduced to two sites and close monitoring is conducted for impacts to selected sensitive plant populations, and 3) a larger project with release sites statewide that more aggressively achieves the objectives of the project. Other issues required to be considered under CEQA, such as cumulative impacts and growth-inducing effects resulting from the implementation of the proposed project, are analyzed in Chapter 6, Other CEQA Considerations.

EFFECTS NOT FOUND TO BE SIGNIFICANT

During the initial study, it was determined that there would be no impact to several of the environmental factors contained in the environmental checklist (see Appendix A for Notice of Preparation). For most of these factors, including: air quality; cultural resources; geology and soils; hazards and hazardous materials; hydrology and water quality; mineral resources; noise; population and housing; public services; recreation; transportation/traffic; and utilities and service systems, it was determined that there would be not impact because there is no evidence that the proposed project will cause impacts to those types of resources. Effects to the aforementioned environmental factors are not discussed in detail in this DEIR.

It was also determined that there would be no impact to aesthetics and agricultural resources, both of which turkeys have been known to affect in other areas of the state. Vineyard owners have complained that turkeys cause impacts to grapes. In an initial study conducted by the Department in the fall of 2001, it was determined that turkeys actually caused little impacts to grapes that could otherwise be harvested. Although vineyards are located relatively close to some of the project areas, turkeys already occupy these lower elevation environments. The goal of the proposed project is to establish turkeys in higher elevation environments, where grapes are not grown. Therefore, the proposed project is not expected to impact agricultural resources found in the project areas. The Department is currently taking separate actions to minimize any impacts that turkeys may cause to agriculture throughout the state. The Department has also received complaints by citizens that turkeys are a nuisance, largely in urban areas. Most often, these complaints focus on turkeys causing disturbances to landscaping, defecating on walkways, etc., and damage to property such as automobiles and homes. Rarely, complaints are also received regarding turkeys that are behaving aggressively towards people. Similar to agricultural resources, these types of known impacts to aesthetic resources largely occur within

currently well established turkey range. The proposed project is being carried out in remote areas where these types of resources are not expected to be impacted. The Department is also taking separate actions to minimize impacts to aesthetic resources statewide. Therefore, it was determined that the proposed project will not impact aesthetic or agricultural resources found in the project areas.

EFFECTS TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Numerous sensitive species, including those listed as rare, threatened, and endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act (FESA) and/or the California Endangered Species Act (CESA), may be found in the project areas. Potential impacts to these species include direct consumption of plant parts and individual animals, indirect impacts to habitats resulting from foraging activities, and competition or displacement of animals.

Turkeys are known to consume plants in the same genus as many of the sensitive plants potentially present in the project areas, but they are not known to have ever impacted any of these species. Turkeys coexist with the aforementioned plants within and outside of their native range, and they are not known to have ever caused significant impacts to any of them. The remaining sensitive plants potentially present in the project area are not known to be consumed by turkeys. Turkey herbivory is not expected to result in a significant change in the abundance or distribution of any of these sensitive plants. Turkeys are not known to significantly alter habitats or spread invasive species. Based on the analysis herein, the proposed project is not likely to result in displacement of any of the sensitive plants potentially present in the project areas.

Invertebrates are the most common animal foods consumed by wild turkeys. Reptiles and amphibians are the only other group of sensitive animals that have

appeared as food items in the wild turkey literature; however, such reports are rare. The proposed project may result in some incidental predation of these sensitive animals potentially present in the project area, but based on the analysis herein, the proposed project is not expected to significantly effect the overall abundance or distribution of any of these species. None of the sensitive animals potentially present in the project areas occupy a similar niche as wild turkeys and there are no known competitive relationships between wild turkeys and any of these species, and based on the analysis herein, the proposed project is not expected to affect the distribution or abundance of any sensitive animals potentially present in the project areas through competition.

Because no significant impacts were identified to any of the sensitive species potentially present in the proposed project areas, no impacts to any land-use plans in the project areas designed to protect sensitive species were considered significant either.

ISSUES TO BE RESOLVED

The CEQA Guidelines (Section 15123 (b)(3)) require an EIR to identify issues to be resolved, including the choice among alternatives and whether or how to mitigate for significant effects to the environment. Issues to be resolved pertain primarily to selection of the proposed project or an alternative. The suggested actions by the Department are discussed below, with comparison to the alternatives discussed in Chapter 5.

The Department is recommending the proposed project as a conservative alternative to the more aggressive Alternative 3, which includes release sites throughout the state. The proposed project balances the Department's goals to provide hunting opportunities for wild turkeys while proceeding cautiously with turkey releases and gathering additional information regarding the effects of releasing turkeys in new

environments. The release sites proposed in this project were also selected partially to avoid conflicts with land management in areas such as National and State Parks, while providing new turkey hunting opportunities on significant areas of public lands.

Because the effects of turkeys to the environment cannot be determined with absolute certainty, Alternatives 1 and 2 provide even more cautious approaches to releasing turkeys in new habitats in the state. Alternative 1 would involve conducting more research regarding wild turkey ecology in California environments within currently established range before conducting the proposed project or any other turkey releases intended to expand current wild turkey range in the state. Alternative 2 involves turkey releases at a subset of the proposed project sites, including the Sierra and Plumas sites, with a more focused monitoring effort that addresses effects to sensitive plant communities based on focal species of concern. This alternative would involve collecting information in habitats most representative of those where future range expansion projects may be proposed.

CONCLUSION

The information presented in this DEIR does not support a conclusion that the proposed project to release wild turkeys at the six sites in northern California will have a significant impact to the environment. The opportunistic feeding behavior of wild turkeys has caused concerns about their potential to exploit sensitive species to the point of decline. However, such opportunistic feeding behavior by wild turkeys has demonstrated that throughout their range they tend to utilize those resources most widely available to them in the environment, and are therefore unlikely to over exploit any particular species. The habitat relationships of wild turkeys have been studied throughout their range and wild turkeys have never been known to have a significant impact on any plant or animal population within or outside of their native range.

Furthermore, wild turkeys have existed in California for decades, and there is no evidence that they have had any impact to the environment in any location in the state.

Wild turkeys have become a popular game species in recent years, and public demands for hunting opportunity are increasing each year. Wild turkey hunting has several economic benefits to the state, including local economies in and near the project areas. Such benefits are discussed in the Department's Resident Game Bird Hunting Document. Hunting activities generate revenue through hunting license sales and sporting equipment sales that generate federal aid for wildlife restoration back to the state. The proposed project will allow the Department to partially meet its directive to provide additional wild turkey hunting opportunities on public lands, which may increase economic benefits to the state.

Because the potential impacts of wild turkeys to the environment can not be determined with absolute certainty, the Department selected the proposed project as a conservative alternative to a more ambitious project to release wild turkeys throughout the state. Post-release monitoring will be used to determine the success of these releases in a range of habitats representative of possible future projects before proposing additional projects. The body of information collected from these efforts will be used by the Department to evaluate future projects.

Because the proposed project will not result in any significant impacts to the environment at the six recommended sites, no mitigation measures are suggested. Any additional projects to expand wild turkey populations in other areas of the state would be proposed in a future environmental document, following the collection of information from post-release monitoring in the proposed project.